

Historic, archived document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

HOW TO ORGANIZE AND CONDUCT COUNTY FORUMS

(REVISED, 1936)

This Pamphlet is intended to assist Organizations and Individuals interested in establishing County and other Forums, particularly in Rural Areas. It has been prepared by the Extension Service and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration of the United States Department of Agriculture, in response to an increasing number of requests for guidance of this character. It is an attempt to present in readable, nontechnical language some fundamentals of a method for increasing opportunities for obtaining facts and viewpoints on problems and questions of interest to rural people. A companion pamphlet, "Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods", is also available without cost.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

The Extension Service and the
Agricultural Adjustment Administration cooperating

In many parts of the country farmers have become interested in sponsoring and participating in forums where current issues are discussed. Many of the forums are on a county-wide basis, to permit farmers from neighboring communities to talk things over.

As the interest in holding forums has spread, requests for material on how to organize such meetings have been repeatedly received by the Department of Agriculture. In view of the importance to the democratic process of a thorough and impartial threshing out of present-day public questions that farmers think important, the Department of Agriculture—with the Extension Service and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration cooperating—is responding to these requests by issuing the suggestions on how to organize county forums contained in the following pages.

A companion publication, called "Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods", is also available, outlining procedures that have been found successful for meetings of informal groups. In addition to these two publications on method, a series of leaflets is available on some of the subjects most often chosen for discussion by farm groups. The topics of the leaflets for Discussion Series 1936-37, ready December 1, are as follows:

- DS-1. What should be the farmers' share in the national income?
- DS-2. How do farm people live in comparison with city people?
- DS-3. Should farm ownership be a goal of agricultural policy?
- DS-4. Exports and imports—How do they affect the farmer?
- DS-5. Is increased efficiency in farming always a good thing?
- DS-6. What should farmers aim to accomplish through organization?
- DS-7. What kind of agricultural policy is necessary to save our soil?
- DS-8. What part should farmers in your county take in making national agricultural policy?

How to Organize and Conduct County Forums

What Are County Forums?

COUNTY FORUMS are meetings held to stimulate thinking on issues of current interest. At each of these meetings, information and points of view on the subject selected for discussion are presented by one or more speakers. Following the speeches, the chairman invites questions and comments from the listeners.

The purpose of a forum is to open up the question in hand, to give an idea of the various factors that ought to be included in a well-rounded consideration of the subject, and to point out the various attitudes toward the subject which are current in the community.

The forum is not an end in itself. If it is successfully carried on, it will stimulate members of the audience to examine and express their own ideas on the topic under review. The question period following the speech or speeches will allow opportunity for some of the participants in the forum to contribute to the discussion; others will press the evening's inquiry further in private conversations; still others will want to read up on the subject at home.

In many communities where forums are held, the thinking started at the county gathering is carried further by holding local discussion groups.

Discussion groups are quite different from forums or lectures. Speeches or long statements have no part in their proceedings. Each group of fifteen to thirty-five members is led by a chairman, who does not talk much himself, but who tries to draw out the views of the persons present. This allows people who are for the most part listeners at the county forum to take an active share in examining current problems and developing a reasoned attitude toward them.

How to Organize County Forums

When a county forum is started some one person is ordinarily the moving spirit who puts the county forces into action. It is important to the success of the forum for that person

1. to be acceptable to all factions in the community;
2. to have the energy, the organizing ability, and the time necessary to carry the project through.
3. to have a clear understanding of the methods of conducting forums.

If there is a council or other body representing the major groups in the county, the organizer might well ask for its sponsorship of the project. If there is no such council, he will probably find it advisable to form a county forum committee, representing the farm organizations, the cooperatives, the educational forces, and other interested agencies. It is highly desirable for the various groups in the community to be more or less equally represented on the committee.

The County Forum Council

At the first meeting of this county forum council, a plan for the forum meetings should be developed on the basis of local interests, local convenience and local needs.

The Forum Chairman

The council should also select a chairman or a series of chairmen to preside over the forums. The chairman sets the tone of the meeting. He should be the sort of person who can:

1. establish an informal relationship between speakers and audience.
2. keep his own remarks down to a minimum, and tactfully but firmly hold the speakers to agreed limits for the length of speeches.
3. draw out audience and speakers during the question period in such a way as to promote lively but good-humored discussion.
4. summarize concisely at the close of the meeting the information and attitudes which have been presented and the questions remaining for further discussion.

The work of carrying out the plan decided on by the council should be divided among its members or committees of its members. The various tasks will include—

Meeting Place

1. Selecting and preparing a meeting place. It is important that the place chosen should be one where all the people attending the forum will feel at home, where lighting and seating arrangements are as comfortable as possible and where it is easy to hear. Often the local high-school auditorium offers a good meeting place.

Publicity

2. Getting out announcements and securing publicity. Papers reporting the meetings will be aided in presenting accurate and interesting accounts if the council secures from the speakers advance copies of their talks or at least paragraphs containing the highlights of what they have to say.

Libraries

3. Interesting local libraries and the libraries of nearby colleges and organizations in making available some time in advance the publications, books, pamphlets, and periodicals which they have on the topic of the next forum meeting; in preparing exhibits of such material; in posting lists of books and pamphlets which could be ordered by persons interested in further study of the question.

Speakers

4. Securing speakers. The definite and early commitment of speakers to deal with given subjects on given dates is vital to the success of the forums. The speakers should understand clearly the purpose and kind of talks they are expected to give, and the length of time within which to give them. If there is one speaker, he should plan not to exceed thirty-five to forty-five minutes. If there are two speakers, a half-hour maximum should be enforced; if three, twenty minutes is a fair allotment. Speakers should bear in mind the question period to follow the scheduled program, and allow both time and material to make this a success. Talks should stimulate inquiry rather than attempt to be final and conclusive. Statistics are good only in small doses. (Where figures are important to the subject, a good way to present them is by a wall chart or picture that everyone can see.)

Speakers who present different angles of a subject are more likely to be stimulating than those who see altogether eye to eye, but the discussion should not degenerate into a "tit for tat" debate. The aim of the meeting is to provoke thought rather than to convince the listeners of one particular point of view.

So far as possible, the speakers should be farmers. Maximum use should be made of talent within the county, though outside speakers may lend stimulus if not secured in too great numbers.

The Forum Meeting

Several days in advance of the forum meeting, the chairman should check up to see that the members of the Council assigned the tasks outlined above have completed their preparations.

At the first meeting he should outline in a very few minutes the plan of the series, the need of talking about pressing issues at a time like the present, and the relation of the county forum to small discussion groups. At each meeting discussion groups that are being organized in the county should be spoken of, and reports on sessions held by such groups between forum meetings should be announced briefly.

Before introducing the speaker or speakers, the chairman may well indicate how the subject relates to the life of the community, and where the detailed problems of the locality fit into the problems of region, state, or nation. If there is more than one speaker, the chairman will probably wish to show how the topics of the speeches fit in with each other. After the last speech is over, he should summarize what has been said in such a manner as to open the way for the audience to go on with the discussion.

At the close of the meeting the audience should be referred to sources of further information on the question just discussed, and the time, place, subject, and speakers for the next forum should be announced.

What to Read

Organizers of county forums and leaders of discussion groups may wish to read more about methods than is contained in this pamphlet and its companion, "Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods." They may also wish to have suggestions for readings on subject matter related to the topics they plan to discuss.

"Books, Pamphlets, and Other Materials Recommended for Teachers of Workers' Education" revised edition June 1936 is a bibliography which grades the materials listed according to simplicity of style, gives brief descriptions of their contents, and states their price and where they can be obtained. A special section, under Economic and Political Problems, is devoted to agriculture. This publication is kept up to date by periodic revision and may be obtained without charge from the Office of Specialist in Workers' Education, Education Division, Works Progress Administration, Washington.

"Public Affairs Pamphlets", obtainable without charge from the Office of Education, United States Department of the Interior, Washington, is a periodically revised list of pamphlet materials on current topics, including agriculture. Titles and authors, addresses of organizations from which the pamphlets can be obtained, prices, number of pages, and brief comments on contents are included.

"Leaflets, Pamphlets, and Booklets", obtainable at 5 cents per copy (stamps acceptable) from Information Service, 105 East Twenty-second Street, New York, contains a list of over a hundred current pamphlets published in 22 series on a wide variety of topics.

"A Guide to the Literature of Rural Life", compiled by Benson Y. Landis, revised edition 1935, is obtainable without charge from the Department of Research and Education, 105 East Twenty-second Street, New York City.

Suggestions for pamphlet packages of background material suitable for use by members of discussion groups have been prepared by

the Department of Agriculture for the eight topics listed as Discussion Series 1936-37 on the inside cover of this leaflet. The suggestions consist of 10-20 titles of short, simply written material which may be obtained either free or at nominal cost.

"A Reading List on Forums and Group Discussions", revised edition 1936, can be secured for 10 cents from New York University, Emergency Adult Education Program, Series 2, Bulletin No. 2.

The following material on methods may also be of assistance to those in charge of discussion group work.

Adams, Lucy W. *THE TALK OF THE TOWN*. Journal of Adult Education, 4: 60-64, January 1932. \$0.75.

Adams, W. F. *THE CROSS-SECTION ROUND TABLE*. Journal of Adult Education, 5: 61-63, January 1933. \$0.75.

Bowman, Le Roy C. *HOW TO LEAD DISCUSSION*. A Guide for the Use of Group Leaders. New York, The Woman's Press, 1934. 31 pp. \$0.35.

California State Department of Education. *DISCUSSION-GROUP LEADING*. Los Angeles. 4 pp. mimeographed. Free.

Cummings, Milton C. *FIRST STEPS IN THE GROUP DISCUSSION METHOD*. Technical Service, Works Progress Administration of Connecticut, 350 Institute of Human Relations, New Haven, Conn., 1936. 10 pp. Free.

Education Department, Ohio State Farm Bureau. *COOPERATIVE DISCUSSION CIRCLES: A Guide Book on the Organization and Leadership of Discussion Groups*. 620 East Broad Street, Columbus. 1936. 24 pp. \$0.10.

Elliott, H. S. *THE WHY AND HOW OF GROUP DISCUSSIONS*. Association Press, New York, 1923. 56 pp. \$0.25.

Elliott, H. S. *THE PROCESS OF GROUP THINKING*. Association Press, New York, 1928. 225 pp. \$3.00.

Fansler, Thomas. *DISCUSSION METHODS FOR ADULT GROUPS*. American Association for Adult Education, New York, 1934. 149 pp. \$1.50.

Gross, A. A. *A COMMUNITY DISCUSSION GROUP*. Journal of Adult Education, 1: 287-290, June 1929. \$0.75.

Klinefelter, C. F. *POINTS ON LEADING GROUP DISCUSSION*. Education Division, Works Progress Administration, Washington, D. C., 1935. 5 pp. mimeographed. Free.

Lenhart, Elta. *DISCUSSION GROUPS*. Adult Education and the Library, 5: 35-52, April 1930. \$0.25.

Lindeman, E. C. *SOCIAL EDUCATION*. New York, The New Republic, 1933. 233 pp. \$1.00.

Lindeman, E. C. *SOCIAL METHODS FOR SOCIAL PROBLEMS*. Progressive Education, 10: 253-255, May 1933. \$0.50.

Needham, I. B. *USES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE DISCUSSION METHOD*. Journal of Home Economics, 27: 514, October 1935. \$0.30.

Overstreet, Harry A. *ON THE PANEL*. Occupations, 13: 425-27, February 1935. \$0.50.

Pollard, Elizabeth W. *GIVE YOUTH DISCUSSION PRACTICE*. Educational Research Bulletin (Ohio State University), 13: 148-50, Sept. 19, 1934. Free.

Prunty, Merle C. *OUR TOMORROW; The Tulsa Public Evening Schools*. Progressive Education, 11: 287-88, April-May, 1934. \$0.50.

Roper, R. C. *THE AMERICAN DISCUSSION LEAGUE*. Bulletin No. 1, The American Discussion League, 522 Fifth Avenue, New York. 1936. 39 pp. \$0.10.

- Sheffield, Alfred D. DISCUSSION, LECTURE-FORUM AND DEBATE. Quarterly Journal of Speech, 18: 517-31, November 1932. \$0.75.
- Sheffield, Alfred D. TRAINING FOR GROUP EXPERIENCE. New York, The Inquiry, 1929. 105 pp. \$1.50.
- Studebaker, John W. THE AMERICAN WAY. Democracy at Work in the Des Moines Forums. New York and London, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1935. 206 pp. \$2.00.
- Studebaker, J. W., and Williams, C. S. EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY. Public Affairs Forums. U. S. Dept. of the Interior Bulletin 1935, No. 17. Superintendent of Documents, Washington, D. C. 74 pp. \$0.10.
- Wileden, A. F., and Ewbank, H. L. HOW TO CONDUCT PUBLIC DISCUSSION. Circular No. 276. Extension Service of College of Agriculture, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis., 1935. 64 pp. Free.
- Williams, A. P. CONFERENCE PROCEDURE IN TEACHING VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE. Use of the Conference in Agricultural Evening Classes, rev. ed., Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1932. 35 pp. (U. S. Federal Board of Vocational Education. Bulletin No. 147; Agricultural Series No. 38.) Free.